

Future for Disability Studies

Simi Linton

1) It is necessary for the field to start to make clearer distinctions between what is considered disability studies and what is not. Although it is unlikely that anyone would suggest that there be an absolute boundary, efforts to circumscribe the domain, and to anticipate the consequences of limitless permeability across the borders are worthwhile. I am concerned with providing a coherent rationale for marking a border, setting off disability studies as a socio-political-cultural examination of disability, from the interventionist approaches that characterize the dominant traditions in the study of disability.

It is timely to mark this border, as the name "Disability Studies" has begun to crop up around the United States and Great Britain to describe graduate and undergraduate courses and programs in everything from the training of health care workers and occupational therapists to courses in literary criticism that examine representation and metaphor. The health and occupational therapy programs' appropriation of the term "Disability Studies" compromises the integrity (the intellectual integrity, not moral integrity) of a field designed to explicate disability as a social, political and cultural phenomenon. The housing of the study of disability determines how it is studied. I advocate the establishment of a discrete field of disability studies, grounded in the Liberal Arts and set apart from the applied fields. I think courses in disability studies can and should be taught in the applied fields, but programs in these areas should maintain a separate identity from disability studies.

2) Scholars in disability studies should use our work to question the social construction of "diversity" and "multicultural." Although there has been some progress in the last couple of years, organizations representing multicultural and diversity initiatives, Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies, Lesbian and Gay, Queer, African-American, Asian-American, Native American and Latino/Latina Studies have barely recognized disabled people's perspectives on panels or plenary sessions. Further, they have, at times, excluded disabled people by not providing access and accommodation. Although each of these fields may seem marginal, they have formed their own shape and texture and render their own authority. Therefore, the knowledge that they privilege and the knowledge they marginalize warrant consideration, particularly from the perspectives of the margins. It would seem that scholars in these areas, given their struggles, and their dedication to challenging privileged discourse, would welcome the types of inquiries that disability studies can provide.

3) Disability studies and deaf studies folks need to meet and resolve, or at least tackle, the problems that emerge in discussions of who is disabled, who is not (are Deaf people disabled?), and also which is a cultural group and which is not.

Future for SDS

1) SDS needs to position itself as a consulting organization for other scholarly groups. SDS should be the place that ASA, APA, AHA etc. turns to when they want to learn how to accommodate disabled people, how to instruct their members on equitable employment practices with disabled job applicants, and, importantly, how to integrate disability studies into their curricula. Members who can do this work should be identified, and should be paid by these organizations for consulting services whenever possible.

2) Increase representation in membership from people from underrepresented groups. Scholarships, or other mechanisms should be explored with funding organizations to bring this about.

Simi Linton, Ph.D., is a consultant and writer in New York City.